

Polling the Public

By WILLIAM W. NEWCOMB

THE American Economic Foundation, sponsor of the "Wake Up, America" Sunday radio hour, has been receiving a considerable quantity of mail from Georgeists. Every time Norman Thomas or some leftist is scheduled to debate with Dr. Ruth Alexander, or some other rightist, a whole avalanche of mail descends upon the office of Richard Rimanoczy, the Program director. I have also had some correspondence with Mr. Rimanoczy. In a reply to a letter of mine, he said: "We have been considering another program on the Henry George issue, but the Committee has not felt the subject is sufficiently defined in the public mind to make the discussion a very effective one. We had a program of this nature last year, but it did not turn out to be very successful."

I choose to believe that my correspondent was not trying to sweetly say that monopoly interests prevent the American Economic Foundation from giving us another trial. I have listened to too many well-meaning Georgeist orators among socially alert audiences, and the shame of this situation rests not with the audience or the communication media, but with our inability to be articulate in a world where millions of people have had their minds pretty well grooved by publicists who know how to take the public pulse.

Mr. E. R. Dibrell, a trade association executive, gives a meaningful definition of public relations: "The planned presentation of your point of view in terms that will create public understanding and win acceptance."

Now I wonder if, when promotional literature is being prepared by Georgeist institutions, the copywriters know what the average man feels causes unemployment. They can't very well until they have talked with the man in the street.

The American Institute of Public Opinion took a poll of those on relief, June, 1939, on the question, "What do you blame for the present unemployment in this country?" The results follow:

Increased use of machinery.....	23%
Short-sighted attitude of business.....	13
Capital not being invested.....	10
Policies of Roosevelt administration.....	8
All other causes.....	46

100%

The "all other causes," 46%, being just double the main concrete cause given, indicates that most people don't have a particularly defined explanation. But the major single reason expressed should give us pause for thought. It is well known that the building trades of the A. F. of L. have used every means possible to deter the use of machinery. A letter from a Georgeist friend of mine in Seattle states that the hotel rooms

of the city are filthy because vacuum cleaners cannot be used by the union maids. The great lower middle class white collar worker cannot afford to build a house because shelter must be constructed in a way which "creates the most work without the use of machinery."

But there are questions on which public opinion is very well defined. People believe that government old-age pensions should be given (91% to 9%); that a sales tax or income tax could provide such pensions (87% to 13%); that labor unions be required to incorporate (86% to 14%); that government loans should be made on a long term and an easy basis, to enable farm tenants to buy the land they now rent (83% to 17%).

There is a science to public opinion measurement, and the debacle of the *Literary Digest* poll of 1936, when it predicted the election of Landon, has shown a new criterion of near-infallibility by comparing the work of the *Fortune*, Crossley and Gallup technique of poll gathering.

The *Literary Digest*, in mammoth circulation drives, polled the public from the "tel-auto" lists, comprising people who possess automobiles and telephones. Throughout the decades of American history those of better means turned out to be the election polls more than did the lower-income masses. Of the latter, the socially-conscious ones frequently voted Farmer-Labor, Progressive, Socialist or Communist. But other millions of economically depressed felt there was no use in voting. "Candidates for both parties are reactionary," they said. In 1920, 26,705,000 people voted. In 1940, 49,815,000 voted! The economically-depressed felt they now had a leader, and the telephone-automobile owners no longer represented the basic total of those who used their enfranchisement.

That almost twice as many people are voting today than in 1920 would indicate that a much larger ratio of our population is interested in vital social, political and economic issues. It also indicates that every stratum of society is interested. More people are conscious of the background of this war than of the last world war. Consequently a technique which can measure public opinion can be very useful in charting the course of action by our legislative, executive and judicial representatives.

Of course, action by representatives in Congress and State legislatures is not necessarily a criterion of public opinion. The politician is primarily interested in satisfying pressure groups which serve as middlemen for his own constituency; these middlemen and his constituents are so concerned with their local pork barrel, the interests of the Nation are frequently left begging. The actions of many Labor, Union and

Farm blocs are outstanding examples. But the public opinion polls establish a norm for the nation's viewpoint, and perhaps nothing has helped unify the nation in legislative action so much as have the findings of these polls.

Fifty years ago James Bryce wrote in "The American Commonwealth": "The obvious weakness of government by opinion is the difficulty of ascertaining it." That is no longer true. The science of measuring public opinion is here, is emerging from its experimental stage. In this article I wish to tell something of the work of the American Institute of Public Opinion, headed by Dr. George Gallup.

The work of this Institute is explained by them as follows:

"The Institute is a fact finding organization whose sole purpose is to measure public opinion on political and social issues of the day, and to report facts for the benefit of all. Its role as an organization is one of strict impartiality. It has no political predilections, and does not espouse any political or private cause no matter how worthy. It is not concerned whether the views of the people, as shown by the surveys, are right or wrong, wise or unwise. It simply reports what these views are. The Institute believes that in making the mass of voters articulate through the sampling referendum it is providing a worthwhile advance in the art of democratic government.

"The Institute's source of income is a group of daily newspapers which have exclusive privilege to publish the results of the surveys. The newspapers are supplied with releases three times a week reporting the public's views on current questions. The newspapers subscribing to the Institute are of all shades of political belief."

The question might arise as to whether the Institute ever distorts its findings. Polls are competitive. Thus, if one poll distorted its findings a competitive poll would immediately look into the subject, to see if truth was being published or not. The pre-election polls are of course most subject to check—the check of 130,000,000 people. And those engaged in polling public opinion are so zealous of accuracy that when a tendency was discovered for polls to continually underestimate the Roosevelt election votes by two per cent, the American Institute took a test poll in Pittsburgh to learn, if possible, what the element of error was.

The assumption of error, they felt, lay in the fact that their interviewers were "white collar" folks. Would trade union people, people of known racial social consciousness, people in less dressy clothes, induce respondents of lower economic levels to answer questions with more personal conviction, and with less tendency to suit the answer expected by, or implied in, the appearances of the white collar interviewer? The results showed that conclusively. White collar interviewers and manual worker interviewers covered the same regions within the same 24-hour periods. The former group—the "experts from the Gallup office"—was known as the control group, the other the experimental group. The findings of the experimental group were closer to the election showings of Roosevelt than the ballot results of the control group.

Many men in the field of research have looked with favor on the manifestations of the democratic principle pregnant in

public opinion polls. Harwood Childs, W. L. Crum, Claude Robinson, Daniel Katz and many other students of social study have given weighty thought to the place of public opinion polls in the American scheme of things. Dr. Childs' studies are of particular value to Americans because he gave considerable time to examining the influence of public opinion in Germany during the thirties, it being his good fortune to be on the scene where he was given access to the Hitler-Goebbels proselytizing techniques. I strongly recommend a reading of Childs' "Introduction to Public Opinion," Gallup's "Pulse of Democracy," and the *Public Opinion Quarterly* (published by the School of Public Affairs, Princeton, N. J.). These two books and this journal will indicate how marketing research has been applied to social and economic examination.

Georgeists, too, need to take the pulse of democracy. There is no use throwing away thousands of dollars worth of printed advertising on the public if the public isn't interested in our advertising angle. There is no use depending upon one text and one author, if the public decides it wants another package and another trade-name. Soap is a cleaning agent in any package; Georgeism is free economy in any cellophane. But both of them have to be sold in accordance with Dibrell's public relations definition: "The planned presentation of your point of view in terms that will create public understanding and win public acceptance." Richard Rimanoczy implies that we are not observing this rule, when he discovers that Georgeists on the "Wake Up, America" program don't draw a pile of letters to his desk from the *general public*.

Perhaps we had better study the polls conducted by the Institute, *Fortune* magazine and Archibald Crossley to find what people are thinking. On the basis of questions already propounded and questions which might be propounded in the future by Georgeists, a public relations campaign can be set up in Georgeist institutions that should finally pay for itself. It is time that we take the public pulse. Only by understanding it can we progress.

[Mr. Newcomb is at present a member of the Interview Staff of Audience Research Institute, and promises to present us with more valuable information on public opinion in relation to the problem of promoting the Georgeist philosophy.—Ed.]